

The Editorial Notebook

The Spirit of Kissinger Past

The Senate's SALT II debate turns on one voice more than any other — a voice without a vote. If Henry Kissinger opposes the arms control treaty, or supports crippling amendments, its demise is virtually certain. But to do that, the former Secretary of State would have to repudiate his own works in two Republican Administrations.

Republican and conservative critics argue that President Carter's treaty would lock the United States into "strategic inferiority" because the Soviet Union possesses more and bigger intercontinental ballistic missiles. But that "inferiority" was established in the Kissinger-Nixon treaty, SALT I, in 1972. The United States had a big lead then in warheads, bombers and missile accuracy, and Mr. Kissinger argued correctly that this lead made the two strategic forces essentially equivalent.

But SALT I did not bar Moscow's effort to narrow or overtake the American lead. That effort would result only in more overkill were it not for an American invention that now could threaten American security — MIRV multiple warheads. They give one Soviet missile, carrying six to ten big warheads, the ability to destroy several American land-based Minuteman missiles in their underground silos. So by the mid-1980's, a third of the Soviet ICBM force might in theory be able to wipe out the bulk of America's 1,000 Minutemen in a surprise first strike.

It was President Nixon who opened

the way for this vulnerability. He refused to seriously discuss a MIRV ban in SALT I and pressed ahead with a MIRV deployment that Russia was certain to imitate. Belatedly, in late 1973, Mr. Kissinger tried to limit Soviet MIRV deployments in ICBM's to a few hundred missiles. But Moscow refused, and in November 1974 Mr. Kissinger and President Ford settled for high but equal SALT II limits on missile-launchers and bombers — 2,400 on each side, 1,320 MIRVed.

Then, in January 1976, Mr. Kissinger proposed the deal that eventually resolved the main remaining SALT II issues: a constraint on American cruise missiles and exclusion of about 300 Soviet Backfire bombers in return for a comparable reduction in total Soviet missiles and bombers.

It is essentially this Kissinger treaty that the Carter Administration will put to the Senate next month — with one major gain. In two years of difficult talks to close all imaginable loopholes, Secretary Vance also obtained some curbs on ICBM improvements. Despite temporary verification problems, these qualitative restraints set a significant precedent for SALT III.

That leaves a remedy for Minuteman vulnerability back where the Ford Administration had also left it — in American hands alone. While restraining Russia's buildup, SALT II puts no real restrictions on present

Pentagon programs for bigger or more accurate missiles, including 3,000 cruise missiles and a mobile replacement for Minuteman triple its size. Defeat of the treaty, however, would probably rule out the replacement that SALT critics favor — the "shell-game" type of mobile land missile, each with 20 launching sites. For without SALT II, Moscow could add warheads faster and more cheaply than the United States could build more launching sites.

The real issue posed by SALT's critics does not, in fact, lie in the treaty. That is whether the country would carry out the strategic programs needed to avoid the feared "missile gap" of the mid-1980's. "The euphoria always generated in the United States by signing a treaty," says the Coalition for Peace Through Strength, "might well produce further cutbacks, as was the case after SALT I."

But the Carter Administration does not intend to repeat the Nixon-Brezhnev embrace of 1972. It warns against the illusions of détente and sees Soviet-American competition continuing alongside a growth in cooperation. It is this rivalry that makes it essential to put a cap on the nuclear arms race, even at a high level, and to begin the process of missile reductions and qualitative constraints. SALT II will do that. Mr. Kissinger was right to start the process. He would be wrong now to finish it off.

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